

Item #18: Gray Wolf Populations

Evaluation Objectives: To evaluate gray wolf population changes; number of packs, productivity, and known human-caused mortality on the forest.

Methods: The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has collected information concerning the number, location and production of wolf packs in the area in cooperation with the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks (FWP). FWP attempts to place radio collars on wolves in each pack to document residency and production. Radio-collared wolves are tracked and located by aircraft approximately twice per month. Annual reports are prepared by FWP.

Evaluation: The recovery goal has been 10 packs in northwestern Montana which has probably been every year since 2002. Originally the FWS and now the FWP collects annual information concerning the number, location, and production of wolf packs in the area.

Table 18-1 shows the minimum fall wolf population and breeding pairs in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area for the years 1988 – 2010.

Table 18-1. Minimum Fall Wolf Population and Breeding Pairs in the North West Montana Recovery Area for Years 1988-2010 (numbers include the population within northern Idaho)

Year	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Population	14	12	33	29	41	55	48	66	70	56	49	63	64	84	108	92	59	126	171	230	282	319	374
Breeding Pairs	1	1	3	2	4	4	5	6	7	5	5	6	6	7	12	4	6	11	12	23	18	26	24

In 2007, 36 packs were thought to contain 23 breeding pairs. A breeding pair is defined as an adult male and an adult female wolf, accompanied by 2 pups that survived at least until Dec 31. Packs are distributed from near the Montana-Idaho border east to the Rocky Mountain Front, and from the Montana-Canada border south to Interstate 90. In 2010 there were an estimated 326 animals in 68 packs, 21 of which were breeding pairs in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area. In 2010 the FNF provided habitat for, or at least partially provided habitat for about 15 packs. Since 2002, at least 7-9 packs have used or partially used the FNF. Annual wolf reports are available at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/wolf/annualreports.htm>.

Human caused mortality is limited on the forest. There was a legal hunt in 2009 and will start again in 2011. Most human caused mortality for wolves is associated with livestock conflicts. This is not the case on the FNF where only 2,500 animal unit months are permitted which is a very minor amount compared to other parts of Montana where wolves are present. In 2008 one wolf pack, with a home range that included part of the FNF, had lethal action taken against it due to depredation occurring off the forest on private land. The Hog Heaven pack was lethally removed in 2008 after chronic livestock depredations that began in 2007. In 2010 the Lemonade Springs cattle allotment on the Tally Lake RD had 1 depredation report which was confirmed by a Federal wildlife agent.

Northwest Montana wolf numbers and breeding pairs have progressed in size since the 1992-1997 forest plan reporting period. 2010 was the 11th year in which 30 or more breeding pairs were documented within the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) states (ID, WY, and MT) area. Because threats have been reduced, on February 27, 2008, the FWS announced the *final rule designating the northern rocky mountain population of gray wolf as a distinct population segment and (DPS) removing this distinct population segment from the federal list of endangered and threatened wildlife*, effective March 28, 2008. However, a lawsuit was filed to reverse the FWS decision and on 7/18/2008 the court granted an injunction that read, "Endangered Species Act protections are hereby reinstated for the northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf pending final resolution of this matter on the merits". The species was again an endangered species and management actions with potential effects underwent consultation with the FWS. In December 2008, FWS revised the NRM delisting rule originally proposed in February 2007. On January 14, 2009, FWS announced its decision to delist wolves throughout the NRM except the State of Wyoming, due to the lack of an accepted plan. The Federal Register publication of the final rule was made in May, 2009. On August 5, 2010, the District Court ruled that delisting within the NRM DPS could not occur without Wyoming and vacated the delisting of the entire DPS. Wolves throughout the entire NRM DPS were relisted. On April 15, 2011 President Obama signed the Department of Defense and Full-Year Appropriations Act, 2011. A section of that Appropriations Act directed the Secretary of the Interior to reissue within 60 days of enactment the final rule published on April 2, 2009, that identified the Northern Rocky Mountain population of gray wolf as a DPS and to revise the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife by removing most of the gray wolves in the DPS. This rule was published in the Federal Register and effective May 5, 2011.

After the wolf population is delisted, the ESA requires a mandatory, minimum 5-year post-delisting oversight period during which the FWS reviews the implementation of state management plans and wolf population status, providing a safety-net to ensure that the species is able to sustain itself without ESA protection. If wolves became threatened again, the FWS could relist them by emergency order.

Recommended Action: The FWS and FWP have been monitoring the population since the late 1980s. The FWP has assumed wolf management from the FWS. FWP is required to continue monitoring populations in Montana. The forest needs to maintain adequate big game (elk and deer) habitat for prey, continue to provide for expansive areas of non-roaded habitat, continue to maintain low livestock density under special use permits, and as needed coordinate project proposals with FWP for technical advice. This reporting item is accomplished by FWP and all data reported here is provided within their annual report. Biologists should continue to use wolf management biologists for technical assistance as needed and utilize the FWP annual wolf reports for project assessments.